

Communication Strategies and Pitfalls

Schools and districts need to engage in local-level communications efforts around the Educator Effectiveness (EE) System for several reasons.

- Internal audiences (educators, school staff, and district personnel) need a clear understanding of: 1) the EE System and state law; 2) EE goals and purpose; 3) how the EE System will apply to their specific role; and 4) how EE will impact them and their professional development. Educators must understand these elements before they will trust the System.
- External audiences (parents, school boards, community members, local media, and students) need to understand the purpose and intended impact of the EE System, chiefly in terms of improving outcomes for students by improving instruction.

Internal and external audiences tend to receive and respond to information coming from within their buildings and districts more readily than information coming from outside the district. Thus—in addition to information from DPI—communication efforts need to take place on both the school and district level.

When formulating and/or delivering communications about the system, keep in mind:

- ❖ **Describe Behaviors, Not People.** When using the word “effective,” follow it with an activity rather than a job title: describe the behavior vs. *the person*. For example, “effective teaching” or “effective leadership” vs. “effective teacher/principal.” Again, this removes the label from the person and redirects focus to the professional act of educating.
- ❖ **Student Results.** Tie all messaging back to improving results for students. Remember that educators dedicate their days and their hearts to the kids in their classrooms and buildings. Educators will be more likely to embrace change if it relates to *helping them improve their students’ success*.
- ❖ **Avoid Jargon.** Educators, like people from any profession, often use a lot of technical terms, acronyms and other language specific to education. Outsiders will not understand education jargon, and in fact, educators themselves often interpret terms differently. Effective communications employ language that is clear and meaningful to its audience. For example, instead of talking about SLOs or domain components, focus on terms like student learning and growth or the different things teachers do.
- ❖ **Establish Two-Way Communication.** District and schools need mechanisms for feedback and monitoring the reach and reception of communications. Consider designating district and building EE point persons who are local, go-to experts on the system.

- ❖ **Acknowledge the Teacher-School-Parent Partnership.** Be sure to acknowledge the important role that parents play in their child's education. Effective teaching is the #1 school-based factor in student achievement. Effective leadership is the second most important. Home life conditions present critical out-of-school influences on student learning that cannot be ignored, nor become excuses. Engaged parents are a necessary component of a child's success in school.
- ❖ **Build Understanding to Build Trust.** Parents and community members will go to teachers and principals to talk about what they are hearing from peers and the media about EE. Teachers need to be informed by someone they trust (their building leaders or peers) about the implications of these changes before teachers become messengers to parents.
- ❖ **Avoid Continuous Reform.** Refrain from using the word "reform." Most educators are fatigued with "reforms" and believe that many reform efforts come and go. Rather than "educator evaluation reform," try using "improving educator evaluation" (or refining or enhancing). Instead, ask educators what they do currently, and explain how EE can help.
- ❖ **Mutual Understandings, Collaborative Planning.** Don't talk about teacher evaluation in isolation. Make mention that principals, schools, and districts all have responsibility (and accountability measures) for student growth and success. Ensure that teachers do not feel like all the focus is solely on them. Remind them that principals are also a part of the EE System, and that they will be evaluated along the same timelines as teachers.
- ❖ **Professional Growth = Student Improvement.** Make sure to include elements of support, continuous improvement, professional growth, and student success in your messages. The EE System is focused, first and foremost, on educator improvement!

[Updated March 27, 2014]

Adapted from Colorado Educator Effectiveness: Communication Strategies and Pitfalls, Colorado Department of Education, July 30, 2012